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SUBJECT: UNESCO SEMINAR TACKLES ISSUE OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE WITH THE ARAB WORLD

[11](#). SUMMARY AND COMMENT: At a UNESCO International Seminar entitled "New Stakes for Intercultural Dialogue" academics, diplomats, and artists predominantly from Europe and the Arab world discussed cross-cultural communication, the role of the city in intercultural dialogue, and the unique experience of the Arab world. While some participants presented interesting ideas on how to foster intercultural dialogue, others criticized what they saw as the West's desire to impose its values on the Arab world. Overall, the seminar did not generate any broad consensus on intercultural dialogue. The seminar took place June 6-7, 2006 and was organized by the Permanent Delegation of the Sultanate of Oman to UNESCO and the Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogues, UNESCO in the framework of the Arabia Plan. The seminar, which had approximately 100 participants, was part of Omani Cultural Days at UNESCO, a part of the proclamation of Muscat as the Arab cultural capital 2006. (Note: Oman currently presides the UNESCO General Conference.)

[12](#). UNESCO's Arabia Plan is intended "to increase the knowledge of Arab culture in the world and to encourage greater mutual understanding between Arab culture and the other cultures, by promoting dialogue and exchanges." Activities such as these, thoughtfully organized and targeted to appropriate audiences, can advance U.S. objectives of countering extremism. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

OPTIMISTIC PROPOSALS FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

[12](#). Panelists discussed both how to make intercultural dialogue more effective, and how "the city" has promoted intercultural dialogue. One keynote speaker, Arjun Appadurai, of the New School in New York, contended that in order to find common ground among cultures, we should not speak of culture or religion as if it had no internal debate, but rather bring this internal debate into dialogue with others. To that end, he also pointed out the problems created when one person claims to speak for an entire group or religion. Mr. Appadurai, along with several others, strongly criticized Samuel Huntington's theory of a Clash of Civilizations, arguing that the theory implicitly stated that intercultural dialogue was impossible. Mr. Appadurai was the sole panelist from the United States.

[13](#). Several panelists idealized the "city" as a great forum for intercultural dialogue. Keynote speaker Andr Miquel of the College de France discussed the city during antiquity and the medieval times, including Cairo, Baghdad, and cities in Iran and Greece, and specifically mentioned Baghdad as the "home of culture" for the Arab world. Another panelist spoke of the need for more local programs that promote intercultural understanding, citing successes in Frankfurt and Rotterdam. Another interesting point brought up by many is that culture is more than words; it is also other forms of expression such as looks, gestures, and clothing.

PRAISING THE ARAB WORLD AND PROMOTING CULTURAL RELATIVISM

[14](#). A keynote speaker in the session on "The Experience of the Arab World" argued for a broad notion of cultural relativism, saying that Europeans are too proud of their human rights and put too much emphasis on assimilation. Traugott Schoefthaler, director of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership between the European Union and other states that border the Mediterranean), said that there is nothing wrong with maintaining differences, and that the world should adopt a "common language of differences" just as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had been a "common language of values." He also contended that interfaith dialogue (but not intercultural dialogue) is virtually impossible. In the ensuing discussion, two participants from Arab states also criticized what they viewed as the West's wish to impose its values on the Arab world. Other participants expressed their support for the conference and noted the importance of continuing dialogue on these issues.

OLIVER